



Reporting concerning social media behavior by health professionals and medical trainees

Position Statement

The Association for Healthcare Social Media (AHSM) recognizes the need to actively address social media behavior that may perpetuate health misinformation, exacerbate distrust of health professionals, or result in professional consequences for the poster. Some health professionals and medical trainees have demonstrated activity and/or behavior on social media that may adversely affect public health and public opinion of the medical profession.

Though the need to address these concerns in a timely fashion is critical so as not to allow the further propagation of problematic social media posts, we as an organization believe it is essential to do so in a systematic manner. We believe that the perception of a fragmenting medical community may further drive distrust in the medical profession. Though disciplinary action is often necessary for social media misuse, we believe this should be executed through protocols set forth by hospitals, health institutions, training program, and/or professional schools (e.g. medical, nursing, dental schools) rather than in a public forum.

As an organization, AHSM suggests the following:

- Notifying the individual or individual's institution directly of observed social media behavior prior to mass distribution of concerning content on social media. This has been mentioned in existing recommendations by other medical organizations. ^[1]
- Reporting of observed activity in violation with federal law to federal authorities as appropriate.
- Reporting of observed activity in violation with social media platform policies and/or community guidelines through platform reporting pathways as appropriate.
- Refrain from reposting content with concerning social media behavior for commentary.

- Auditing of existing content by the individual and their employer to prevent further distribution of problematic content.

AHSM continues to support policies that promote accurate health information, uphold professionalism standards, while respecting freedom of expression on social media. Social media misuse among trainees has been described by 60% of surveyed medical schools, with activity including discriminatory and sexually explicit content.^[2] Over a quarter of vascular surgery trainees were noted to have potentially unprofessional or clearly unprofessional social media content in a study from 2019.^[3] Some reports have identified potential gaps in understanding of appropriate social media use between trainees and faculty who train them.^[4] Moreover, it is also important to identify the motivations behind inappropriate social media activity (e.g. lapses in judgment, fatigue, etc.) and the individual's degree of insight.^[5] We believe that consequences from inappropriate social media behavior can serve as important lessons for health professionals as they proceed in medical practice and professional development.

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Sources & Additional Resources:

1. AMA Professionalism in the use of social media: Code of Ethics Opinion 2.3.2. <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/ethics/professionalism-use-social-media>
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3. Hardouin S, Cheng TW, Mitchell EL, et al. Prevalence of unprofessional social media content among young vascular surgeons. *J Vasc Surg*. 2019. Epub ahead of print.
4. Pradip D. Patel, John L. Roberts, Karen Hughes Miller, Craig Ziegler & Michael Ostapchuk (2012) The Responsible Use of Online Social Networking: Who Should Mentor Medical Students, *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, 24:4, 348-354, DOI: [10.1080/10401334.2012.715260](https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2012.715260)
5. Terry Kind (2014) Social Media Milestones: Entrusting Trainees to Conduct Themselves Responsibly and Professionally. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*: March 2014, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 170-171.